

# The Afghanistan War — Nine Years Later and No End in Sight

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When Donovan sang the song [“And The War Drags On”](#) more than four decades ago, he was referring to Vietnam, but one could be forgiven for thinking the song was written yesterday about Afghanistan. It has now been about five months since President Obama announced his strategy of increasing troops in Afghanistan and a vague commitment to withdrawing most U.S. troops beginning in mid-2011. The administration began back pedaling from that pledge almost immediately after Obama made it. With the deadline for withdrawing troops only slightly more than a year away, that goal seems more remote today than it did a year ago.

In recent months, the war, which is now in its ninth year, has begun to feel like a permanent part of the political landscape. The occasional attack in Kabul, discussion between American and Afghan leaders, captured terrorist or strategic correction by the U.S. all blend together for all but the most intense observers of the war. The small victories and opportunities for meaningfully defeating the Taliban continue to come and go, usually drawing less attention each time. This was captured very well by an [article in this week’s \*New Yorker\* magazine](#). The article itself was not bad, but it felt like the fourth or fifth time the *New Yorker* had published the more or less same article since the war started.

The death this week of the 1000th American in this war, however, was a reminder that this war may seem like part of the political scenery to many, but it is much more intense for some. One thousand dead American soldiers is a lot by any measure, but it is even more tragic if it is for a war that continues out of its own momentum with no end in sight. It is not clear for what goals those 1,000 American soldiers died, but it is clear that whatever the goals were, they have not been achieved.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, for that matter, are sufficiently remote for most Americans, that to a great extent, it remains true that the U.S. is not at war, but the U.S. military is. For many Americans, even those who are against either or both these wars, the conflicts are neither close nor relevant enough to generate genuine outrage anymore. This absence of outrage makes the rationalizations for the wars seem more rational and the promises of victory more promising. Thus the war has, and will likely continue to, drag on because it is the path of least resistance.

If next year’s deadline is missed, forgotten or explained away, then it is likely that the U.S. will, whether or not we admit this, be making an open ended commitment to remain in Afghanistan, not least because future promises, and threats to withdraw troops will not

be taken seriously. The question of whether the only way to keep our country safe is through a war with no end in sight will have been implicitly answered in the affirmative.

Deescalating the war in Afghanistan, on the other hand, will not solve the security problems we face, but it will allow us to focus on the right questions and to consider other possible ways to keep ourselves safe from terrorism. These are the tough questions which, ironically perhaps, Obama avoided through his decision last December. Inevitably, these questions will have to be addressed and waiting until another thousand American soldiers lose their lives to do so would be a tragic and unnecessary mistake.